



1974

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, David D. (1974) "What is why? (Or, why is what.)," *Work Papers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of North Dakota Session*: Vol. 18 , Article 14.

DOI: 10.31356/silwp.vol18.14

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/sil-work-papers/vol18/iss1/14>

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What Is Why? (Or, Why Is What.)

David Thomas

It is sometimes said that in the past decade or so linguistics has advanced from asking "What?" to asking "Why?" It is true that in the Bloomfieldian era linguists generally and deliberately asked only what questions and proscribed why questions. And it is also true that linguists today are not afraid to ask "why?" But the question goes deeper than just the surface structure interrogative.

What do we mean when we ask why questions? We could ask why there was a historical sound shift changing one sound into another. Or we could ask why a word takes one form rather than another. Or we could ask why a particular deep structure appears in one surface form rather than another. These are some of the kinds of why questions.

But questions such as these can be restated as what questions, as : Under what conditions is sound x likely to change to sound y? Under what conditions will a word take form x rather than form y? Under what conditions, or in what environments will a deep structure of a particular type be manifested as form x rather than y? Such questions are different in scope from questions asked in the Bloomfieldian period but are not essentially different in kind. Not all the answers can be given, but the questions can be asked

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The scope of linguistic enquiry has expanded greatly since 1933, especially with Pike (1954-56) pointing the way to analysis of higher levels of phonology and grammar, and with Harris (1957) and Chomsky (1957) pointing the way to analysis of semantic structures. Both of these areas have undergone large development in the last 15-20 years, and linguistic terminology, methodology, and notation conventions have changed radically. But the basic questions, questions asked by any scientific enquiry, are essentially the same. The earlier what questions were asked within a rather restricted sphere of enquiry; the current why questions are what questions asked within a wide scope of enquiry, accepting answers from discourse, semantics, and culture, and from the nature of the communicative process in general.

The question of questions seems to narrow down to 3 types:

- 1) In what distributional environments is a certain feature found or does a certain change take place?
- 2) what human limitations, whether physiological or psychological, constrain certain combinations of features or certain sequences?
- 3) What situational factors affected the speaker's choice of alternatives.

Of these three questions, the first two fall within the realm of modern linguistics, but the third, though affecting speech, is probably best left to scholars other than linguists. But all three questions can be stated either in a what form or a why form. So why seems to be not essentially different from what.